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Testimony of
The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women
Before the
Veterans Affairs Committee
February 17, 2015

Re: S.B. No. 904 (RAISED) AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE HUSKY WOMEN VETERANS' PROGRAM

Senators Flexer and Henri and Representatives Hennessey and Yaccarino, and distinguished members of the Human Services Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) in support of **S.B. 904 An Act Establishing the Husky Women Veterans' Program**.

SB 904 is modeled after Indiana legislation (Senate Bill 354), which passed unanimously and was signed into law in 2014, and which created a program within the Indiana Department of Veterans Affairs tailored specifically to meet the needs of women veterans. The latest data from the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (as of January 30, 2015) reports that in there are 16,545 women veterans in Connecticut.¹

This bill, which creates a similar program in the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs, recognizes the reality that long standing veterans' programs were not developed with the unique needs of woman veterans in mind. As more women veterans return home from combat situations than ever before, research is helping us to better understand the experiences and needs of women veterans. A defining difference between the experience of men and women veterans is the increased risk and incidence of sexual assault (also known as military sexual trauma or MST) against women. According to the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN), while both men and women can experience MST, women in the military are at much higher risk for sexual assault and harassment. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and major depression often result from experiences of MST. In a piece entitled The Facts: Military Sexual Assault, SWAN cites the following:

¹ Department of Veterans Affairs (January 30, 2015). Fact Sheet: Revised Women Veterans Population. <http://www.va.gov/WOMENVET/docs/WomenVeteransPopulationFactSheet.pdf>

- In a study of a sample of veterans who were seeking VA disability benefits for PTSD, 71% of women and 4% of men reported an in-service sexual assault. For men, the assault was more likely to occur while out of service; for women, the opposite was true.²
- Sexual assaults that occur in the military are often not isolated incidents and may involve more than one perpetrator—37% of women veterans report being raped at least twice, and 14% report experiences of gang rape.³
- Some evidence suggests that black women in the military are more likely to experience more severe forms of harassment compared to their white women counterparts, including unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion.⁴

These statistics highlight just one important and defining difference in the experience of women veterans and point out the need for programs and services that recognize and address these differences with sensitivity and compassion. We applaud the committee for its consideration of this important issue and urge your support for this bill.

² Murdoch et al. 2004. "Prevalence of In-Service and Post-Service Sexual Assault among Combat and Noncombat Veterans Applying for Department of Veterans Affairs Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Disability Benefits." *Military Medicine* 169 (5):392-395.

³ Sadler et al. 2003. "Factors Associated With Women's Risk of Rape in the Military Environment." *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 43:262-273.

⁴ Buchana et al. 2008. "Comparing Sexual Harassment Subtypes among Black and White Women by Military Rank: Double Jeopardy, the Jezebel, and the Cult of True Womanhood." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 32 (4):347-361.